

What Reference Librarians Can Learn from *Car Talk*

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My predecessor, Diane Zabel, introduced a new column to *RUSQ*, "For Your Enrichment." Diane described the column as "an occasional column that publishes interesting articles on topics outside the purview of the journal's regular columns" (*RUSQ* 46:4, p. 7). This column has been an outstanding source of thoughtful articles on a wide range of issues and interests relating to reference librarianship. I am delighted to continue that tradition with Charlotte Ford and Susan Weiss's witty and insightful piece on *Car Talk* and librarianship. Who knows, maybe Tom and Ray will think about a post-show career volunteering in their local library.—Editor

Note: Click on the speaker buttons next to the transcriptions to listen to Car Talk clips.

Picture this: You walk into your local library, and who should be sitting at the front desk but the guys from the NPR show *Car Talk*, Tom and Ray Magliozzi! Recognizing their faces immediately from their website and their weekly newspaper column, you blurt out, "Hi, I'm Susan from Miami and I have a question!"

"Suuuusan!" they exclaim in unison. "Is that Susan with an S or with a Z?" asks Ray.

"With an S," you reply.

"Yes, you seem like the more traditional type!" says Tom. "What's up, Susan?"

Last spring, *Car Talk* fans were saddened to learn that Tom and Ray (AKA Click and Clack, the Tappet brothers) would be retiring from the radio in October 2012. Their show, which features call-in questions about cars and car repair (as well as jokes, car songs, and a weekly puzzler) has aided, informed, and entertained listeners in Boston since 1977 and nationwide on NPR since 1987.¹ Given their years of public service experience, is it so crazy to imagine that we might find Click and Clack volunteering in a library reference setting, post-retirement? Would they face a steep learning curve? Or have they actually been providing reference service all along—interviewing patrons over the phone and offering explanations, instruction, and referrals to help them resolve their problems?

Car Talk is a wildly popular radio show, reaching 3.3 million listeners a week; it is the highest-rated show on NPR.² If it is in fact the case that Tom and Ray Magliozzi have been offering auto-specific reference services for the past thirty-five years, attracting a growing audience while traffic at many library reference desks has dwindled,³ perhaps librarians could learn something by looking closely at what they're doing. How do Click and Clack's interactions with their callers

compare with the library reference interview? How do the personal qualities they display in these interactions compare with the reference librarians' ideal? What can reference librarians learn from listening to *Car Talk*?

In the summer of 2012, we set about to answer these questions—as well as to enjoy revisiting some “classic” *Car Talk*. We systematically selected for analysis twenty of the thirty “Top Shows” available on the *Car Talk* website (www.cartalk.com/content/top-shows) and divided up listening responsibilities. Kern and Woodard's chapter, “The Reference Interview,” in Bopp and Smith's 2011 *Reference & Information Services: An Introduction* provided the basis for our comparison of *Car Talk* interactions to reference interactions.⁴ For every call in the twenty programs, we completed a reference evaluation sheet to evaluate Click and Clack's approachability and interest, question negotiation, searching and answering, and follow-up.⁵

At the bottom of each evaluation sheet we included a checklist of the “personal qualities of reference librarians” outlined in Bopp and Smith: service orientation, patience and persistence, sensitivity, self-control, flexibility and sense of humor, good judgment, and knowledge and confidence.⁶ As we listened to the interactions we took notes, where applicable, on how these personal qualities were or were not displayed in the interactions. After each of us had listened to two shows, we stopped and shared data to make sure our interpretations were basically on the same page. We then proceeded to listen to the rest of the selected shows, making a concerted effort not to kill all the fun involved in listening to *Car Talk* as we analyzed the Tappet brothers' reference interviewing style.

Between us, we listened to 152 *Car Talk* calls. The length of the calls ranged from just under 2 minutes (an efficient diagnosis of a failing fuel pump) to 12¾ minutes (for the lengthy tale of Max the schnauzer, culminating in the attempt to find a new home for a dog), averaging a little more than 4½ minutes per call (4:37). “Stump the Chumps” calls, where a caller from a previous show was contacted to see whether Tom and Ray's diagnosis and advice were on target, were excluded from our analysis.

It is worth noting up front that an hour-long *Car Talk* show has a very different structure from a typical hour spent offering library reference services. Tom and Ray spend the first few minutes telling a joke, reading humorous letters or news items, or discussing a zany idea before taking calls. There are periodic breaks featuring the weekly puzzler, car songs, and promotions of the “shameless commerce division” of *Car Talk*. The brothers laugh throughout at jokes they make, at each other, and at (and with) the callers. At the end of the show, they chastise their listeners for having “wasted another perfectly good hour” listening to *Car Talk*, acknowledge staff members and imaginary assistants (such as their statistician, Marge Innovera), and sign off with the advice, “Don't drive like my brother!”

However, in many ways, *Car Talk* is similar to a double-staffed reference service taking questions over the phone.

The brothers welcome their callers, interview them about their needs, provide expert explanations, instruction and answers, and send them on their way. Their knowledge and communication skills help them serve their listeners. And, as in reference work, each “client” brings a new and challenging question, and there is pressure to provide a helpful response in a limited amount of time.

THE REFERENCE INTERVIEW VS. THE CAR TALK INTERVIEW

Mindful of some of the similarities and differences between radio call-in shows and library reference services, we examined the 152 *Car Talk* interactions with regard to the steps of the reference interview as outlined in Bopp and Smith.

Opening the Interview

Reference librarians are trained to appear approachable (smiling, making eye contact), to greet their patrons, and to show interest in verbal and nonverbal ways. Although body language is obviously not a part of the radio environment, the *Car Talk* hosts are masters at greeting their callers and showing interest. Callers are asked to provide their first names and where they are calling from; in response, Tom and Ray invariably greet them by name. Usually (more than 75 percent of the time), they also engage in small talk before proceeding to the question, asking callers about the spelling of their names or commenting on their home towns, sometimes asking or teasing them about their occupations. Easy laughter is frequently a part of *Car Talk* interactions from the start. All of this serves to build rapport with the callers even before one of the brothers asks, “What's up?” or “What's going on?” or “What's cookin', man?”—prompting the caller to launch into his or her question. Their relaxed, personal style goes a long way toward putting people at ease.

Question Negotiation

The purpose of the questioning process in reference interactions is to achieve a shared understanding of an information need, one that will enable the librarian to search effectively and respond accurately.⁷ Open, closed, and neutral questions; the use of “encouragers” (such as “yes” and “okay”); and active listening (paraphrasing) are among the question-negotiation techniques that are familiar to reference librarians.

Tom and Ray Magliozzi use all of these techniques in *Car Talk*. They “encourage” extensively and expressively, in every single call—using not only “yeah” and “mm-hmm,” but also “Ah,” “Aha!” and sometimes “Ohhhhhh!” They often paraphrase or repeat parts of a question or components of a narrative back to the caller to be certain they understand what he or she is describing, as in this interaction with Annette from Anchorage, Alaska:⁸

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Caller: *About 6 months ago, I got, um, a huge bag of crab from my sister and brother-in-law. And so . . .*

B1: *A huge bag of what?*

B2: *Ahaha!*

Caller: *A big—a big bag of . . . crab. King crab.*

B1: *Oh, crab! With a B!*

B2: *Oh, you said crab! Hahaha!*

B1: *I thought it was with a P!*

Caller: *(laughing) No!*

B2: *Hahaha! I thought she said crap! Ahahahahahaha!*

The brothers ask a lot of questions of all types: open and closed, funny and serious, related and unrelated to the car question at hand. One can imagine the difficulties involved in diagnosing car problems without actually seeing the car; it is not unlike troubleshooting database-connection issues over the phone, relying solely on a caller's memory of what went wrong. Click and Clack manage to elicit detailed descriptions of the callers' needs while simultaneously entertaining listeners. Interestingly, many of the calls they receive are not solely about cars, but about relationships or behaviors concerning cars. These, too, involve question negotiation. Here is a typical exchange, with Julie from Jamaica Plain, Massachusetts:



B1: *What's going on?*

Caller: *Well, I have a problem with my husband and his inability to use the emergency brake when he parks our car in the garage. Um—*

B1: *Oh, inability, or unwillingness?*

Caller: *Um, his, probably unwillingness.*

B1: *Wait, this only happens when he parks in the garage?*

Caller: *Well, no, it happens everywhere—*

B1: *Everywhere.*

Caller: *—but this time he totaled the car because of it.*

B1: *Oh, give us all the gory details!*

Caller: *Oh yeah, he, uh, about a week ago he came home from work and pulled into the garage, got out of the car, and shut the door, which created just enough momentum to start the car rolling.*

B2: *Ohh!*

Caller: *It rolled out of the garage,*

B2: *Heh*

Caller: *down the driveway,*

B2: *Heh*

Caller: *across the street, between two trees, down a huge embankment, onto the Jamaica Way,*

B2: *Oh! Hahahahahahaha!*

Caller: *across two lanes of the northbound traffic, which there was no traffic thank goodness, hit the median, and went airborne and crashed on the other side.*

B1: *Oh, did it go into the Arnold Arboretum and destroy—*

Caller: *No, it just missed the wall.*

B1: *—the bonsai collection that they've been—that they've had there for five hundred years? No?*

B2: *It didn't go in the pond either?*

Caller: *No, no, luckily we missed all of that. (laughs)*

B1: *Wait a minute now, what kind of a car is this?*

Caller: *It was a 2002 Volkswagen Passat—*

B1: *Oh, it was.*

Caller: *—manual. It was.*

B1: *Oh, and he leaves it in neutral as well?*

Caller: *Oh yeah, yes. So my dilemma is, we have to buy a new car, and I want to know, is there any way to guarantee that he cannot do this again?*

In all but one of the 152 interactions we listened to, the Tappet brothers asked at least one question after the initial “what’s up?”—and the number was usually much higher: we counted an average of more than 4 questions per call (2.9 “closed” yes/no, this/that questions and 1.4 more “open” who, what, when, where, why, and how kinds of questions). Some of the questions were serious and car-related, while others were humorous or personal. The boundaries between car advice, personal advice, and teasing blur in *Car Talk*, adding to the variety and fun of the interactions with callers.

Searching

The search for answers is a major part of library reference work. Librarians must be familiar with many different kinds of sources and search techniques, and are encouraged to involve the user in the search for information. This is one place in which the work of generalist reference librarians seems quite different from the work of expert mechanic radio show hosts. Tom and Ray seldom cite—or appear to consult—specific sources in their interactions with callers, but rather draw on their car expertise built up over a lifetime of experience. In the interactions we listened to, the brothers sometimes referenced their experiences with similar cars or similar problems. Occasionally, they suggested the car owner ask about a Technical Service Bulletin (TSB) for a particular car, or that he or she consult the owner's manual; a couple of times they recommended specific websites; and once they actually told a caller to visit the library (to check out books on adobe brick making, and avoid hauling a house cross-country)! But by and large, their personal knowledge provides the basis for answering callers' questions.

Answering the Question

Overwhelmingly, the *Car Talk* guys seem to offer relevant, useful information to their callers—with a lot of joking around mixed in. In 152 calls, there were only a handful of cases where the caller did not seem to get at least a *plausible* answer. There were a number of instances in which they set forth several theories of what might be causing a car problem—sometimes disagreeing with each other. There were cases in which they gave some off-the-wall answers along with more serious ones (like when they advised a caller with mice running around his car at night that he should buy a \$2,500 infrared camera to catch them in the act—before telling him what really had to be done). However, if the “Stump the

Chumps” feedback is any indication, Tom and Ray’s advice is pretty good: in seven out of the eight “Stump the Chumps” calls we heard, the answer given was correct. This is certainly higher than the oft-cited “55 percent rule” for librarians.⁹

One of Click and Clack’s most remarkable talents is the ability to provide clear explanations of the causes, or probable causes, of a particular car problem. They are adept at simplifying the complexities of auto mechanics, sometimes using analogies that the ordinary listener can relate to (as when they compared removing a CV joint from an axle to the complexities of removing the back of a wristwatch). This is a competency that reference librarians, who seek to make the process of information-seeking clear to their users, should emulate. At times (e.g., as they asked about when certain noises occurred and where they were coming from, or about the color and consistency of fluids), they laid out the logical thought process they were using in the search for an answer—not unlike what librarians do when they talk through the search process with a library user.

Instruction, or teaching someone how to work through a problem on his or her own, is a high priority for many librarians, especially in school or academic settings. Libraries are workshops in a sense, providing their users with the tools and equipment to seek information, and many users have their own “equipment,” in the form of a computer, to do research independently. The situation is quite different when it comes to automobile repair. As a rule, diagnoses and basic procedures were clearly explained in *Car Talk*, with more explicit how-to instructions offered to those who clearly indicated that they had the desire and the skill—and sometimes the tools and the assistance—to do their own repairs. This often involved a judgment call on the part of the brothers as to whether callers were capable of carrying out particular fixes on their own; in some cases, they advised callers against doing it themselves, whereas in other cases they were very encouraging to callers who were trying to learn the ropes of car repair.

Referrals occur frequently in *Car Talk*. In roughly half the calls we listened to, callers were explicitly referred to a mechanic or repair shop, a dealer, a body shop, a junkyard, a knowledgeable husband or father, etc. In other cases, referrals were implied. In a couple of instances, callers were told not to do repairs themselves: “Brakes are a bad place to start doing your own work!” And sometimes, the referrals were urgent: callers were told, “Fix it immediately!” or “Don’t let it go!” *Car Talk* referrals were generally made after the caller either had been told what to have done, or had been given several possibilities of what might be wrong, that they could then have tested by a mechanic. This is somewhat analogous to a librarian referring a user to another library with a database or other resource that would help them with their need, or perhaps to a subject specialist.

Closing the Interview

In closing the reference interview, librarians are taught to

confirm that their patrons’ questions have been completely answered. The *Car Talk* guys do not do this; yet their callers generally seemed to indicate throughout the call whether they understood the information being presented by saying “yeah” or “uh-huh” or by asking clarifying questions. Callers also know that their on-air time is limited because of the structure of the show (a couple of times, Tom or Ray jokingly told a caller, “Your five minutes are up!”).

A typical closure involves one of the brothers saying, “Good luck!” or “See ya!” while addressing the caller by name. Occasionally (about 15 percent of the time), they ask callers to get back in touch to let them know if their advice was on target or to report on the outcome of an experiment, a prank, or an adventure that the caller is about to embark on (though they joked with one person, “If it doesn’t work out . . . lose our number!”). A couple of times, they invited callers to have their parents call them—and once or twice, they called parents or other family members while on the air (somewhat reminiscent of a school or academic librarian contacting an instructor to clarify an assignment or question). One caller was asked to check back on the “second opinion” area of their website after they posted his question to see what experiences others had.

PERSONAL QUALITIES OF LIBRARIANS AND CAR TALK HOSTS

In addition to understanding Click and Clack’s interview style, we were interested in learning how the personal qualities they display in their interactions with callers compared with the ideal qualities “necessary for excellence” among reference librarians.¹⁰ The *Car Talk* hosts are knowledgeable professionals and skilled interviewers; as described above, they are adept at diagnosing car trouble without actually seeing the car. However, unlike most reference librarians, they also are entertainers, and their listeners expect humor to play a role in every interaction. This gives Tom and Ray license to tease their callers, to ask personal questions, and at times to give outrageous answers—things that librarians are taught not to do. As we listened to *Car Talk*, we noted examples and counterexamples of the personal qualities extolled in Bopp and Smith.

Knowledge and Confidence

A large part of the success of *Car Talk* is because the answers provided to callers with regard to their car problems are knowledgeable and generally sound. Not only are the brothers able to give callers a reasonable idea (or in some cases, a couple of possibilities) of what might be wrong with their cars; they can often give the callers a good idea of the approximate costs of repairs, or tell them how to fix it themselves. Callers respect their expertise: in one show, a lawyer called in to ask them an “expert witness” question; in another, a woman who called in because her husband respected their

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opinions said, “I’m looking to you for authority here!” The fact that they are known and respected allows them to poke fun at their own authority at times.

» **Caller:** *I came across an interesting little device called the Vehicle Fuel Efficiency Booster.*

B1: *Hoho!*

Caller: *Now, according to this, for the low, low price of \$80, this thing will stabilize electrical current going to the computer, the fuel injection system, it also supposedly cuts down on interference from the stereo, air conditioning, what-have-you. . . . Is this remotely possible?*

B2: *Well, lemme, lemme tell you Patrick, I happen to be, maybe I guess the world’s foremost authority on, uh, VFEBs.*

Caller and B1: *(laughing)*

B1: *You may be, yeah! I hope so!*

B2: *I, er . . . what does it claim to do?*

Good Judgment

Good judgment about car-related matters flows naturally from the brothers’ knowledge base. Like seasoned reference librarians, they often make their thought process transparent, weighing evidence as the caller reveals his or her car troubles, charting the path of their diagnosis so it is clear to the listener, and providing rationales for their recommendations. They advise callers when something is dangerous or requires immediate attention (e.g., gas leaks, bad brakes), or when it might simply be time to get rid of a car.

» **B1:** *You’ve got too many things going wrong here.*

Caller: *It’s all been in the past 2 months!*

B2: *I know, well—you know what it might be saying to you? “Trade Me In!”*

B1: *(laughing)*

Caller: *No! It’s just been paid for!*

B2: *Chelsea: “Trade Me In!”*

Caller and B1: *(laughing)*

Some callers pose ethical dilemmas: whether to come clean about having possibly damaged someone’s car, or in one case, how to get revenge on people who put a dead fish in a car as a prank. In these instances, Click and Clack generally lean toward fixing the problem or telling the truth (though they offer humorous options). While their judgment in matters of car repair is outstanding, human-relations questions are often mined for their entertainment value—something hard to imagine a librarian doing. They are strong advocates of pranks and hijinks; for instance, despite their consistent concern for the safety of their callers, they readily told one caller how he might get his car to go 140 mph.

Flexibility and Sense of Humor

Car Talk rests on a solid foundation of knowledge, with humor as its framework: we hear a funny story at the start,

wacky credits at the end, and lots of witty banter, funny noises (made by both the callers and the hosts), and sometimes even singing in between. Click and Clack laugh at their own jokes and at themselves, and this makes us laugh too. They seem to genuinely enjoy working through car issues, they have fun talking with people, and they don’t take themselves too seriously (a typical off-the-cuff comment: “Sometimes we don’t think too good!”). While the structure and style of the show is very different from that of most reference departments, there is something to be learned from the audible pleasure Tom and Ray derive from interacting with callers, the joy they take in their profession, and their ability to gracefully acknowledge their imperfections.

» **Caller:** *The car makes a sound that kind of goes mmm, aaahm, mmm . . .*

B1: *Oh, could you—could you do that again?*

Caller: *If you don’t get emotionally involved!*

B1: *No, I won’t—I promise, I won’t!*

Sensitivity and Self-Control

With their mandate to entertain, the Tappet brothers display much less self-control and sensitivity than one would expect from reference librarians. While they welcome each caller, listen carefully, and seek to provide useful answers, they also may joke that they have already given out the one right answer of the show, or that the caller’s allotted time is running out. In one particularly memorable episode (#552), their staff had given them a “get off the phone excuse machine” with recorded messages, which they used several times in the middle of calls. “[Knock knock knock knock knock] Chinese food! Delivery!” the machine would spout, followed by one of the brothers saying something like, “We gotta run!” It should be noted, however, that they always returned to the question at hand—after laughing hysterically.

Likewise, Tom and Ray are capable of showing great sensitivity: interpreting callers’ tone of voice to know when they are upset or disappointed, outlining inexpensive options for callers who are broke, praising and encouraging callers who are trying to figure out how to fix their cars themselves. But they clearly enjoy razzing callers as well: labeling them “whackos,” calling their ideas “cockamamie,” telling them, “You’re dangerous! We’re glad you’re off the road!” and generally giving them a hard time. Unlike library patrons, callers who enter the *Car Talk* domain know they are fair game for friendly ribbing; and if the brothers tease someone especially hard, they usually tell them they have been a good sport or have been fun to talk with. Sometimes the callers get in a good poke as well—like one who remarked, “This has been surprisingly helpful!” The humorous framework of the show allows these kinds of exchanges to occur in an inoffensive way.

» **B1:** *How long have you been out of the home, Sarah?*

B2: *Is it just, is it just on weekends, or do they—*

B1: *Yeah, do they let you out like every day, or what?*

Caller: *Daily, daily.*

B1: *It's a pleasure to talk to you, Sarah.*

Caller: *Thanks.*

Patience and Persistence

Within the time constraints of their show, the *Car Talk* hosts are persistent—sometimes asking many questions to try to understand a problem (especially one that can have several possible causes) and to offer viable solutions, even putting questions out to their listeners for public comment on the few occasions they are stumped. They also display remarkable patience in listening to long stories and in explaining how certain mechanisms work or what is involved in a particular repair. Their attentive listening and careful explanations are occasionally tempered by humorous remarks—such as, “You changed the story, you no-good liar!” or “What the heck do you want, man? Your time’s almost up!”—accompanied, of course, by laughter.

» **Caller:** *I have a quick question for you guys too, a follow-up. So, so, a couple of times . . .*

B1: *Your five minutes is running out, Theresa!*

Caller: *Oh no! Oh no! Hahaha!*

B1: *Just kidding.*

Service Orientation

Despite joking around and giving their callers a hard time, the *Car Talk* guys are offering a public service. They can say outrageous things to their listeners because, underneath it all, they are trying to help them—even when they offer devious solutions or facetious answers alongside the real ones. They can hold people’s attention when talking about cars and car repair because they are knowledgeable and know how to extract information and offer advice, while injecting humor into the situation. It is the combination of comedy and expertise that charms their listeners and keeps us coming back.

» **B1:** *We can answer anything! It doesn't have to be right, does it?*

CONCLUSION

So, what can reference librarians learn from *Car Talk*? After wasting a number of perfectly good hours listening to Tom and Ray, we found them to be strong models for the following:

- building rapport with patrons, by showing interest in them and their questions
- negotiating the question well with open and closed questions
- drawing on their extensive knowledge base to help resolve questions
- providing clear explanations and, where appropriate,

instruction

- referring questions to others where appropriate
- politely closing the interview (though confirmation of understanding was rare)
- displaying knowledge, confidence, and good judgment in providing service
- maintaining a sense of humor, and not taking themselves too seriously

The entertainment aspects of *Car Talk* that allow Click and Clack to poke fun at their callers, themselves, and the behavior of humans and automobiles in general, make them less useful as models for some of the “personal qualities” that reference librarians are supposed to possess, such as sensitivity, self control, and patience. The library environment is a much more serious one, in which users should expect to have their questions taken very seriously and to be treated with the utmost respect. Still, it is fun to imagine encountering the *Car Talk* hosts at the reference desk:

“Well, Susan, thanks for your interesting question,” says Ray.

“Yeah, you’re not as traditional as we thought—quite a live wire!” adds Tom.

“I appreciate your help,” you say. “Good luck in your new career as librarians!”

“Good luck to you, too—see ya!” they respond. And as you walk away, you hear Tom exclaim:

» **Boy,** *we do get the whackos!*

References and Notes

1. Brian Stetler, “‘Car Talk’ is Heading to Garage,” *New York Times*, June 9, 2012.
2. Ibid.
3. Anna Copeland, “Car Talk: the Brothers Magliozzi go Trisyllabic,” *Omni* (December 1993): 10; Frank Ahrens, “Boyz Under the Hood; ‘Car Talk’ Hosts Mix Advice and Idle Chatter in High-Octane Show,” *Washington Post* (August 21, 1999): C1; Stetler, 2012; Charles R. Martell, “The Ubiquitous User: A Reexamination of Carlson’s Deserted Library,” *portal: Libraries and the Academy* 5, no. 4 (2005): 441–53.
4. M. Kathleen Kern and Beth S. Woodard, “The Reference Interview,” in *Reference & Information Services: An Introduction*, 4th ed., ed. Richard E. Bopp and Linda Smith (Santa Barbara, Calif: Libraries Unlimited, 2011), 57–94.
5. The reference evaluation sheet we used is found in Kern and Woodard, “The Reference Interview,” 74.
6. Kern and Woodard, “The Reference Interview,” 75–79.
7. Ibid., 63.
8. Transcribed dialog is from the following Car Talk shows: #1033 (18:44–19:03) #552 (22:32–23:54) #1050 (11:30–12:05) #1033 (33:10–33:25) #729 (40:52–41:06) #930 (34:19–34:34) #808 (6:34–6:42) #1033 (10:34–10:37) #729 (7:05–7:07). Audio files are used with permission.
9. Peter Hernon and Charles McClure, “Unobtrusive Reference Testing: The 55% Rule,” *Library Journal* (April 15, 1986): 37–41.
10. Kern and Woodard, “The Reference Interview,” 75–79.